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Pattern of conferences

Report of the Fifth Committee

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I. Introduction

1. At its 3rd plenary meeting, on 15 September 1998, the General Assembly, on the recommendation of the General Committee, decided to include in the agenda of its fifty-second session the item entitled "Pattern of conferences" and to allocate it to the Fifth Committee.

2. The Fifth Committee considered the item at its 10th to 12th, 30th, 33rd and 43rd meetings, on 19, 21 and 23 October, 19 and 23 November and 14 December 1998. Statements and observations made in the course of the Committee's consideration of the item are reflected in the relevant summary records (A/C.5/53/SR.10-12, 30, 33 and 43).

3. For its consideration of the item, the Committee had before it the following documents:

(a) Report of the Committee on Conferences;[1]

(b) Report of the Committee on Programme and Coordination on the work of its thirty-eighth session;[2]

(c) Report of the Committee on Information;[3]

(d) First report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998–1999;[4]

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-third Session, Supplement No. 32* and corrigendum (A/53/32 and Corr.1).
[2] Ibid., *Supplement No. 16* (A/53/16).
[3] Ibid., *Supplement No. 21* (A/53/21).
[4] Ibid., *Fifty-second session, Supplement No. 7* (A/52/7).

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(e) Report of the Secretary-General on access to the optical disk system (A/52/803);

(f) Report of the Secretary-General on measures taken to develop further the cost-accounting system regarding the costs of meetings and documentation (A/52/1000);

(g) Report of the Secretary-General on interpretation and translation issues referred to in section III, paragraphs 13 to 15, of General Assembly resolution 52/220 (A/53/221);

(h) Report of the Secretary-General on a cost-accounting system for conference services (A/53/257);

(i) Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions on guidelines for internal control standards (A/53/508);

(j) Note by the Secretary-General transmitting the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "United Nations publications: enhancing cost-effectiveness in implementing legislative mandates" (A/51/946);

(k) Note by the Secretary-General transmitting his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "United Nations publications: enhancing cost-effectiveness in implementing legislative mandates" (A/52/685);

(l) Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions on United Nations publications (A/53/669).

II. Consideration of draft resolution A/C.5/53/L.24

4. At the 43rd meeting, on 14 December 1998, the representative of Tunisia and coordinator of informal consultations on the item introduced a draft resolution entitled "Pattern of conferences" (A/C.5/53/L.24), submitted by the Chairman on the basis of informal consultations.

5. At the same meeting, the Committee adopted draft resolution A/C.5/53/L.24 without a vote (see para. 7).

6. Following the adoption of the resolution, statements in explanation of position were made by the representatives of Austria (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the European Union), Poland, Indonesia (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the Group of 77 and China) and Cuba.

III. Recommendation of the Fifth Committee

7. The Fifth Committee recommends to the General Assembly the adoption of the following draft resolution:

Pattern of conferences

The General Assembly,

A

Recalling its relevant resolutions, including resolutions 40/243 of 18 December 1985, 43/222 B of 21 December 1988, 47/202 A of 22 December 1992, 48/222 A of 23 December

1993, 49/221 A of 23 December 1994, 50/206 A of 23 December 1995, 51/211 A of 18 December 1996, 52/214 A of 22 December 1997, and its decision 52/468 of 31 March 1998,

Reaffirming the mandate of the Committee on Conferences,

Having considered the report of the Committee on Conferences,[5]

1. *Takes note with concern* of the observations of the Committee on Conferences in paragraph 135 of its report and encourages members to participate in the work of the Committee;

2. *Invites* the Committee on Conferences to consider the question of participation of observers in the work of the Committee in accordance with the relevant rules of procedure;

3. *Notes with appreciation* the work of the Committee on Conferences, and takes note of its report;

4. *Approves* the draft revised calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations for 1999 as submitted by the Committee on Conferences,[6] subject to the provisions of the present resolution;

5. *Authorizes* the Committee on Conferences to make adjustments to the calendar of conferences and meetings for 1999 that might become necessary as a result of actions and decisions taken by the General Assembly at its fifty-third session;

6. *Requests* the Secretary-General to provide all the conference services required as a result of decisions taken by the General Assembly at its fifty-third session, taking into account, as necessary, the procedures established by the Assembly in its resolutions 41/213 of 19 December 1986 and 42/211 of 21 December 1987;

7. *Reaffirms* its decision that the headquarters rule shall be adhered to by all bodies;

8. *Decides* that waivers to the headquarters rule shall be granted solely on the basis of the calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations that the Committee on Conferences has recommended for adoption by the General Assembly;

9. *Invites* all its subsidiary bodies that are authorized to meet away from their established headquarters to keep under review the exception to the headquarters rule in the light of their current work situation and to report any changes to the General Assembly through the Committee on Conferences;

10. *Notes with appreciation* that the Secretariat took into account the arrangements referred to in paragraphs 5 and 6 of General Assembly resolution 52/214 A and that the two holidays of Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha, which occur in 1999 on 18 January and 29 March, respectively, shall be observed as official holidays of the United Nations, and requests the Secretary-General to ensure strict implementation of those arrangements when preparing all future draft calendars of conferences and meetings of the United Nations;

11. *Decides* that United Nations bodies should be invited to avoid holding meetings on 9 April 1999 and that these arrangements should be taken into account when drafting future calendars of conferences and meetings;

12. *Requests* the Committee on Conferences to consider, at its next session, the proposal to avoid holding meetings by United Nations bodies on lunar New Year's Day;

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[5] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-third Session, Supplement No. 32* and corrigendum (A/53/32 and Corr.1).

[6] Ibid., annex.

13. *Emphasizes* that, when planning the calendar of conferences and meetings, every effort should be made to avoid simultaneous peak periods at the various duty stations, and requests the Secretariat, when drafting future calendars of conferences and meetings, to merge into one section the draft list of meetings of treaty bodies established under the auspices of the United Nations, and the draft calendar of conferences and meetings of the principal organs of the specialized agencies;

14. *Also emphasizes* the importance of providing adequate conference-servicing resources to all United Nations conference centres;

15. *Notes with appreciation* that the overall utilization factor for 1997 exceeded the benchmark of 80 per cent, in particular at Geneva and Vienna;

16. *Notes* the efforts by the Secretary-General to improve the utilization rates of the conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi for 1996 and 1997;

17. *Expresses concern* that the conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi are still underutilized, as recorded during the period 1996–1997;

18. *Reiterates* its call for better utilization of the conference facilities at Nairobi;

19. *Requests* the Secretary-General, in view of the fact that the United Nations Office at Nairobi has been upgraded to a full-fledged United Nations centre, to explore the possibility of establishing a permanent interpretation service at the centre and to submit a comprehensive report thereon to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session;

20. *Also requests* the Secretary-General, without prejudice to the practices currently used to meet interpretation requirements, to examine the provision of interpretation services to other locations from permanent interpretation structures based in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, taking into account the request contained in paragraph 19 above for the establishment of a permanent interpretation service at Nairobi;

21. *Invites* all subsidiary bodies of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme and the Commission on Human Settlements, and encourages Member States, intergovernmental bodies and regional and other major groupings to consider increasing their use of the conference facilities at Nairobi;

22. *Reiterates* its request to the Secretary-General to assist the aforementioned bodies in improving this situation and to report to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, through the Committee on Conferences, on the actions taken to this end;

23. *Also reiterates* its request to the Committee on Conferences to continue to consult with those bodies that consistently utilized less than the applicable benchmark figure of their allocated resources for the past three sessions, with a view to making appropriate recommendations in order to achieve the optimum utilization of conference-servicing resources;

24. *Requests* that the Chairperson of the Committee on Conferences transmit a letter to the chairpersons of all bodies that utilized less than the applicable benchmark figure (80 per cent) of their allocated conference resources in the previous year, informing them of the problem and drawing their attention to significant loss of meeting time, with a view to encouraging appropriate action on their part so as to improve the utilization of conference resources;

25. *Notes* the importance of meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States for the smooth functioning of sessional bodies, in view of the increased

requests for meetings of regional and other major groups, and welcomes the fact that 81 per cent of the requests for such meetings were met;

26. *Notes with concern* the difficulties experienced by some Member States owing to the lack of conference services for some meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States;

27. *Regrets* that 19 per cent of the requests for interpretation services made by regional and other major groupings of Member States were not met, while recognizing that meetings of Charter and mandated bodies must be serviced as a priority;

28. *Decides* to include all necessary resources in the budget for the next biennium to provide interpretation services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States upon request by those groupings, on an ad hoc basis, in accordance with established practice, and requests the Secretary-General to submit to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, through the Committee on Conferences, a report on the implementation of this decision;

29. *Urges* intergovernmental bodies to spare no effort at the planning stage to take into account meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States, to make provision for such meetings in their programmes of work and to notify conference services well in advance of any cancellations so that unutilized conference-servicing resources may, to the extent possible, be reassigned to meetings of regional and other major groupings of States;

30. *Deeply regrets* that the reports requested in paragraphs 9 and 15 of its resolution 52/214 A were not submitted to the General Assembly and notes, in this context, that those reports were presented only in an oral form to the Committee on Conferences;

31. *Requests* the Secretary-General to submit the reports requested in paragraphs 9 and 15 of its resolution 52/214 A before 31 March 1999, and decides, without prejudice to the provisions of paragraph 8 (a) of its resolution 50/206 C of 23 December 1995, that an oral report cannot substitute for a report requested by the General Assembly;

32. *Also requests* the Secretary-General to ensure that the use of remote interpretation and translation will not affect the quality of interpretation and translation and will not in itself lead to a reduction of language posts;

33. *Further requests* the Secretary-General to present to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, through the Committee on Conferences and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, a report on possible measures that would alleviate the excessive vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations and ensure the required quality of conference services Secretariat-wide;

34. *Requests* the Secretary-General to intensify his efforts aimed at filling vacancies in language services at all duty stations;

35. *Also requests* the Secretary-General, when filling posts of translators and interpreters, irrespective of the proposed contractual status of candidates, to take duly into account their professional qualifications, including pre-job training and experience in order to maintain at all times the highest possible quality in the interpretation and translation services, and to ensure equal treatment of language units of the Secretariat;

36. *Stresses* that the quality of interpretation in the six official languages should be improved in accordance with its resolution 52/214, and decides that the standards that govern the staffing of the interpretation booths shall continue to be observed;

37. *Welcomes* the new organizational structure of conference services, which would allow for more effective coordination among the four United Nations conference-servicing centres in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, and requests the Secretary-General to review the administrative instruction of 8 May 1987 on guidelines for the preparation of host Government agreements falling under General Assembly resolution 40/243 of 18 December 1985[7] so as to reflect the new organizational structure;

B

Recalling its resolutions 47/202 B of 22 December 1992, 28/222 B of 23 December 1993, 49/221 B of 23 December 1994, 50/206 B and C of 23 December 1995, 51/211 B and F of 18 December 1996 and 15 September 1997, and 52/214 B of 22 December 1997,

Having considered the report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions,[8] and the report of the Secretary-General on translation issues,[9]

1. *Expresses deep concern* about deficiencies in the quality of some reports and documents originating in the Secretariat, and requests the Secretariat to take all necessary measures to address the situation and to develop measurements to evaluate improvements made in the quality of reports and documents;

2. *Notes with deep concern* the low rate of compliance with the six-week rule for the issuance of documentation;

3. *Reiterates* its request to the Secretary-General to ensure that documentation is available in accordance with the six-week rule for the distribution of documents simultaneously in the six official languages of the General Assembly;

4. *Requests* the Secretariat to carry out a study on the possible relationship between the late issuance of documentation and the low utilization of conference services by some bodies;

5. *Regrets* that there continue to be delays in the submission of documents to conference services, expresses concern that most of the delay in issuance of a document is due to late submission of documents from the substantive departments, and requests the Secretary-General to ensure that substantive departments prepare their programme of work to meet the deadline for issuance of documents;

6. *Reaffirms* its decision that, if a report is issued late, the reasons for the delay should be indicated when the report is introduced;

7. *Regrets* that its decision taken in paragraph 5 of General Assembly resolution 50/206 C has not been implemented;

8. *Decides* that if a report is submitted late to conference services, the reasons for this should be included in a footnote to the document;

9. *Endorses* the request of the Committee on Conferences to the Secretariat that a report containing detailed data on the reasons for delays in the issuance of documentation and an analysis of the additional costs incurred by document-processing services and of other financial implications of the late submission and issuance of documents be presented to the Committee at its 1999 substantive session;

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[7] ST/AI/342.

[8] A/53/507.

[9] A/53/221.

10. *Notes with concern* that the provisions of paragraphs 24 and 25 of General Assembly resolution 52/214 B are not always being implemented despite reiteration of these provisions in Assembly decision 52/471 of 31 March 1998;

11. *Reiterates* its request that the Secretary-General direct all departments to include, where appropriate, the following elements in reports originating in the Secretariat:

(a) A summary of the report;

(b) Consolidated conclusions, recommendations and other proposed actions;

(c) Relevant background information;

12. *Also reiterates* that all documents submitted to legislative organs by the Secretariat and expert bodies for consideration and action should have conclusions and recommendations in bold print;

13. *Stresses once again* that the press releases should reflect accurately the statements of Member States as delivered in their original languages;

14. *Notes with concern* that the provisions of paragraphs 1.21 and 1.22 of the medium-term plan for the period 1998–2001[10] are not being implemented, and requests the Secretary-General to ensure that the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services of the Secretariat conducts consultations and coordinates the assignment of responsibilities for the implementation of all General Assembly resolutions and decisions and follows up to ensure timely action by relevant departments and bodies;

15. *Stresses once again* the need for compliance with the existing page limits, and invites all intergovernmental bodies to consider, where appropriate, the possibility of further reducing the length of their reports from thirty-two to twenty pages without adversely affecting either the quality of presentation or the content of the reports;

16. *Calls upon* the Secretariat to make its procedures for obtaining waivers to the sixteen-page rule more rigorous, while maintaining, however, the necessary degree of flexibility, with a view to encouraging author departments to reduce the length of their submissions while maintaining high standards of quality;

17. *Requests* the Secretariat to submit to the Committee on Conferences, every two years, updated information on the number and length of documents;

18. *Also requests* the Secretariat to continue consultations with the secretariats of intergovernmental bodies with a view to informing them on the speedy issuance of unedited verbatim transcripts and the cost savings derived therefrom, and encouraging them to follow the example of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space in carrying out the experiment with unedited verbatim transcripts, so as to enable the Committee on Conferences to make final recommendations on the matter;

19. *Emphasizes* that the choice of unedited verbatim transcripts should be consistent with the needs of the bodies concerned;

20. *Requests* the Secretary-General to continue to improve the quality of translation of documents into the six official languages in a timely manner;

21. *Also requests* the Secretary-General to ensure that summary and verbatim records are issued in all six official languages concurrently;

[10] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-first Session, Supplement No. 6* and corrigendum (A/51/6/Rev.1 and Corr.1).

22. *Further requests* the Secretary-General to continue his efforts, where appropriate, to introduce new technologies such as machine-assisted translation and common terminology databases while ensuring that there are no adverse effects on the quality of documentation and translation;

23. *Notes with appreciation* the efforts made by the Secretariat to address the concerns expressed by delegations on translation-related matters, and encourages the Secretariat to continue its efforts to improve quality and proficiency in all six translation services;

24. *Takes note with appreciation* of the decision by the Secretariat to reduce the utilization of self-revision to the recommended level so as to ensure the desired quality of parliamentary texts, and emphasizes that the measures taken in relation to revision of job descriptions, training of staff, peer review and spot checks and other related initiatives should be continued;

25. *Expresses concern* over continued high rates of self-revision during peak workload periods and occasional inadequate translations, which have sometimes hampered the work of delegations, and emphasizes the importance of continuous training for all translators at all duty stations and of developing measures to provide the translators with increased support from submitting offices and secretariats;

26. *Requests* the Secretary-General to ensure that the post of reviser is provided in the six official languages in accordance with paragraph 19 of its resolution 52/214 B and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session;

27. *Stresses* that the United Nations should maintain a permanent interpretation and translation system capable of responding to its average workloads;

28. *Encourages* the Secretariat to continue its efforts to ensure effective linguistic quality control through to the final stage of document production and distribution and to report to the Committee on Conferences on the steps taken in that regard;

29. *Regrets* the difficulties being faced by the language service staff in relation to their career development;

30. *Requests* the Secretary-General to submit a report to the General Assembly at its fifty-third session analysing such problems as may exist related to career development in language services and taking into account that the numbers and grade levels of staff should be commensurate with the needs of the Organization as well as the fact that requirements differ between languages as well as between duty stations;

31. *Recommends* that due account should be taken of the return in terms of, *inter alia*, possible savings and efficiency gains in planning new technology;

32. *Also recommends* that computer-assisted translation systems should be compatible with the existing computer platforms used in the United Nations, that they should be upgradable to future technological developments such as speech recognition and remote access, and that the experience of all duty stations should be taken into account in their development;

33. *Takes note* of paragraph 62 of the report of the Committee on Conferences;[5]

34. *Requests* the Secretary-General to submit a report to the General Assembly at its fifty-third session on the impact of economy measures on the delivery of mandated conference services;

35. *Also requests* the Secretary-General, when preparing budget proposals for conference services, to ensure that all necessary resources are proposed for such services,

giving priority to redressing the inadequacies in the provision of conference services in the most efficient manner for continuous improvements in the quality and delivery of those services;

36. *Decides* to defer to its resumed session consideration of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit,[11] the comments of the Secretary-General thereon,[12] the report of the Committee for Programme and Coordination[13] and the report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions on United Nations publications;[14]

C

Recalling its resolutions 50/206 D of 23 December 1995, 51/211 C of 18 December 1996, 51/211 F of 15 December 1997 and 52/214 C of 22 December 1997,

Having considered the report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions,[4] and the report of the Secretary-General on access to the optical disk system,[15]

Stressing the importance of equal access to, and benefit from, the optical disk system and other new technologies in all six official languages for all Member States and the need to overcome the difficulties faced by some Member States, in particular developing countries, in acquiring the technology to access the optical disk system, as well as other available technologies,

Appreciating the actions taken by the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Informatics of the Economic and Social Council to achieve universal connectivity between United Nations databases and those of Member States, including through their permanent missions, and the training programmes initiated to that end,

Appreciating also the efforts of the Secretary-General to incorporate new information technologies in the work of the Organization,

1. *Welcomes* the efforts of the Secretariat to improve access to the optical disk system, particularly the establishment of additional optical disk system centres;

2. *Recognizes* the efforts to provide wider access to the optical disk system, while continuing to ensure the availability of hard copies of documents for Member States, in particular developing countries;

3. *Requests* the Secretary-General to ensure that all resolutions and decisions, and their annexes, if any, adopted by the principal organs of the United Nations should be posted on the optical disk system expeditiously;

4. *Notes with appreciation* that the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat has launched the United Nations Web sites in Russian, Arabic and Chinese this year;

5. *Stresses* the need for the continuous development, maintenance and enrichment of United Nations Web sites, with a view to achieving equal treatment of the six official languages on those Web sites;

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[11] See A/51/946.

[12] See A/52/685.

[13] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-third Session, Supplement No. 16* (A/53/16), part one.

[14] A/53/669.

[15] A/52/803.

6. *Requests* the Secretary-General to submit proposals in this connection to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session through the Committee on Conferences and the Committee on Information;

7. *Reiterates* its request to the Secretary-General to ensure that the texts of all new public documents, in all six official languages, and information materials of the United Nations are made available through the United Nations Web site daily and are accessible to Member States without delay;

8. *Notes* that, in addition to the free-of-charge connection, via the Internet, of all permanent and observer missions, requests have been received by the Organization for access to the optical disk system from a number of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations;

9. *Reaffirms* that, as provided for in its resolution 51/211 F, access to the optical disk system will continue to be provided free-of-charge to permanent and observer missions and other government offices of Member States, with a maximum of ten access passwords for each Member State, and that the optical disk system will continue to be made available to all staff of the Secretariat;

10. *Endorses* the recommendation of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions in paragraph 13 of its report[4] that a way be found, while maintaining the quality of service and priority given by the General Assembly to the users mentioned in paragraph 1 of Assembly resolution 51/211 F, to apply income generated through optical disk system subscriptions directly to help meet the cost of optical disk system maintenance and/or expansion, and to establish a mechanism to monitor satisfaction with the optical disk system;

D

Taking note of the report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions,[4] and the report of the Secretary-General on the cost-accounting system for conference services,[16]

Stressing the need to provide Member States and United Nations bodies with more comprehensive and accurate information on the costs of meetings and documentation,

1. *Stresses* the need for the Secretariat to take into consideration the experience of all duty stations when improvements were made in existing information systems;

2. *Endorses* the view expressed by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions in paragraph 10 of its report[4] that the report of the Secretary-General does not provide sufficient information at this stage to allow the General Assembly to recommend the endorsement of a full-fledged development of a cost-accounting system;

3. *Requests* the Secretary-General to submit a report to the General Assembly at the earliest opportunity, taking into account the observations of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions contained in paragraph 10 of its report;

[16] A/52/1000.

E

Recalling its decision 38/401 of 23 September 1983 and its resolution 52/214 E of 22 December 1997 concerning the prohibition of smoking in small conference rooms and the discouragement of smoking in large conference rooms,

1. *Calls upon* representatives of Member States to abide by its decision 38/401 and its resolution 52/214 E;

2. *Encourages* all users of United Nations conference facilities, in order to avoid involuntary exposure to passive smoking, to refrain from smoking, in particular in conference rooms.